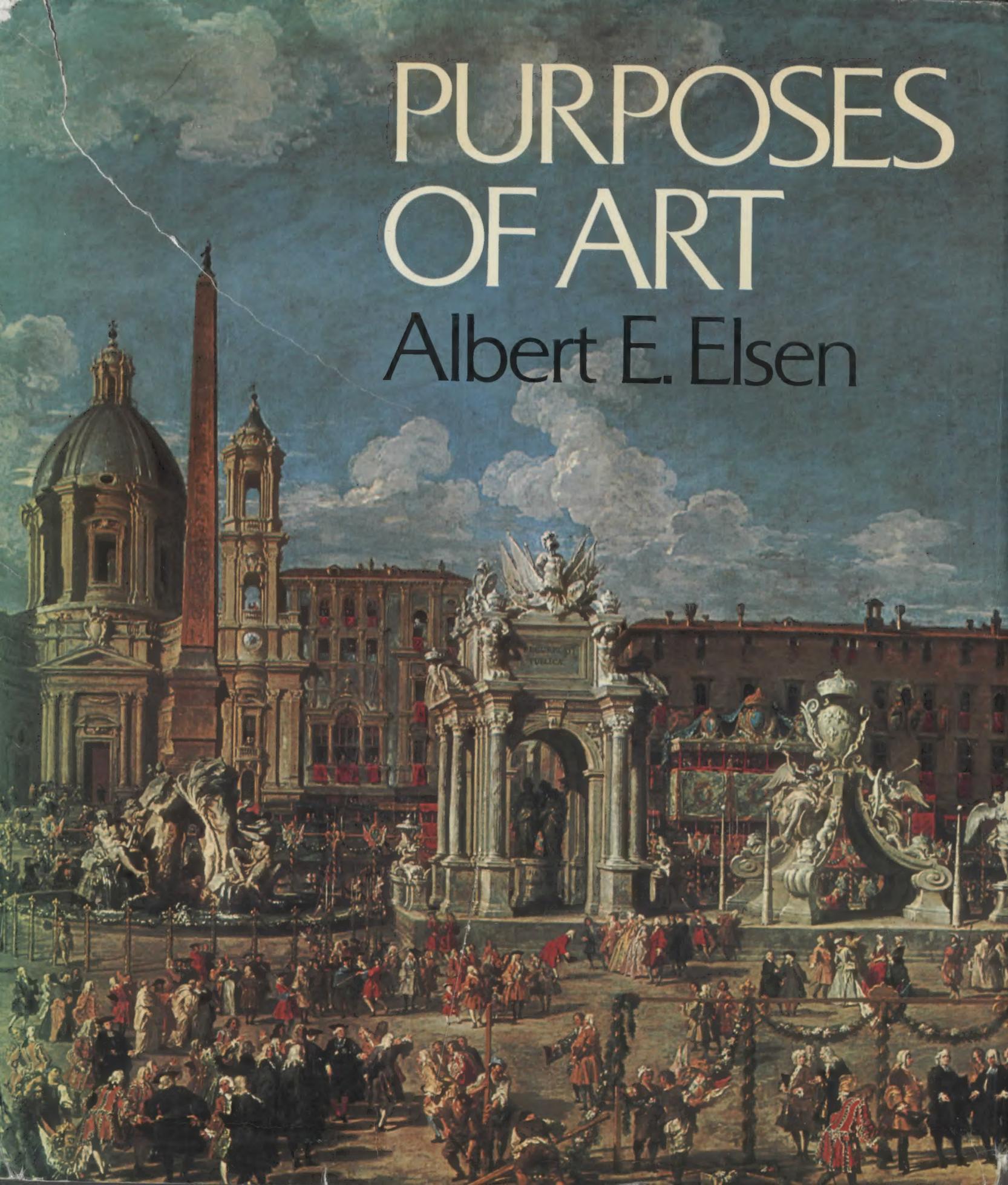


# PURPOSES OF ART

Albert E. Elsen



# PURPOSES OF ART

*third edition*

An Introduction to the History and Appreciation of Art

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# PURPOSES OF ART

Until recent times the artist's role in his culture and in his service to his patron—whether tribal chief, bishop, prince, or town council—was clear, as Saul Steinberg wittily epitomized in his depiction of the statue's evolution (Fig. 530). Art was an instrument of political or religious rule and ritual, moralizing and myth-making, philosophizing and pageantry. It mediated between the visible and invisible forces that governed men's lives. The artist was expected to gratify his patron and to enhance the community by the celebration of its heroes and values, to educate the unlettered, delight the intellectual and connoisseur, and satisfy the financial speculator. At various times in history the artist has played the role of magician and scientist, propagandist and ambassador, decorator and entertainer, visionary and prophet. For the most part, until the 19th century the artist imaged the world as others would have it.

**The Self and Portraits of the Artists** One of the most important developments in the art of the last hundred years has been the effort of artists to bring art closer to its sources in the self, to affirm their identities and those of their means and materials. For example, a small iron sculpture, *The Self* (Fig. 603) by Isamu Noguchi (b. 1904), issued from meditations on "what sculpture was fundamentally about... its relations to people, space and uses in the past." Noguchi wanted to free sculpture from "its captivity by coterie points of view," in order to find "some larger, more noble and more essentially sculptural purpose to sculpture." His emblem for the self is subtly contradictory; at once symmetrical and asymmetrical, it reveals and conceals itself as the light fluctuates; it is made of iron, yet it suggests growth and change. The material and casting came from Noguchi's experience of ancient Japanese art, his form from 20th-century Western abstraction, and his



# CODA

## The Modern Artist

meaning from the exposure of a citizen of the world to its accumulated wisdom.

The long history of art also joins the anonymous hands at Altamira (Fig. 2) with that of Jackson Pollock (Fig. 604). For the latter to occur as it does in a painting has required that art evolve from service to the tribe, church, state, or society to a gratification of the self. The appearance of art has left behind collective public symbols and moved through phases of naturalism to complete abstraction and total permissiveness of means. How fitting that a painting—perhaps the only object of significant value a man can still make by hand in this technological age—should have been signed not with the traditional "Made by my hand," but with the artist's own handprint.

The process by which the modern artist has made his art a more intimate extension of the self often has demanded a radical transformation of the appearance and means of art.

The self-portrait offers the most dramatic and candid revelation of this intimacy, as seen in a comparison of drawings by Leonardo da Vinci and Joan Miró (Figs. 605, 606). At sixty, Leonardo approached the drawing of his own countenance with the same curiosity and discernment that he brought to his observation of nature. In many respects, his drawing is an objective likeness, but Leonardo accentuated his eyes and made them the focal point of the work. The eye was an endlessly fascinating organism for Leonardo; he was amazed that within its small dimensions the whole external world could be perceived. In the drawing there is a graduated intensity of focus from the cursory outline of the top of the head and the broad, undulant treatment of the beard through the darkening and increased detail of the brows, mouth, and nose to the deeply recessed and shaded eyes. The head is a summary of studies of bone and muscle structure (Fig. 585), as well as of the opera-

*opposite left* : 603. ISAMU NOGUCHI. *The Self*. 1957. Cast iron, height  $34\frac{1}{2}$ . Collection Lillian H. Florsheim Foundation for Fine Arts, Chicago.

*opposite right* : 604. JACKSON POLLOCK. Detail of *Number 1* (Fig. 4). 1948.

*right* : 605. LEONARDO DA VINCI. *Self-Portrait*. 1510-13. Red chalk,  $12 \times 8\frac{1}{4}$ . Biblioteca Reale, Turin.

*far right* : 606. JOAN MIRÓ. *Self-Portrait*. 1937-38. Oil, crayon, and pencil on canvas;  $49\frac{1}{2} \times 32\frac{1}{4}$ . Collection James Thrall Soby, New Canaan, Conn.



many contemporary artists, art is an expressive activity in which the product or result is useless for any other purpose.

**The Dilemma of the Artist Militant** One of the most persistent concerns of the modern artist—relieved of the necessity to work within the institutions that traditionally sponsored art—has been to make his profession and his art responsive to the needs of his society. The ideal of bridging art and life, of fusing artist and worker to achieve a social utopia that would make art irrelevant or redundant has brought many artists to the realization that they were working for their own theoretical extinction. The artist's profession has in fact been threatened with extinction, many times, in many places, for many different reasons—internal and external, ideological and economic.

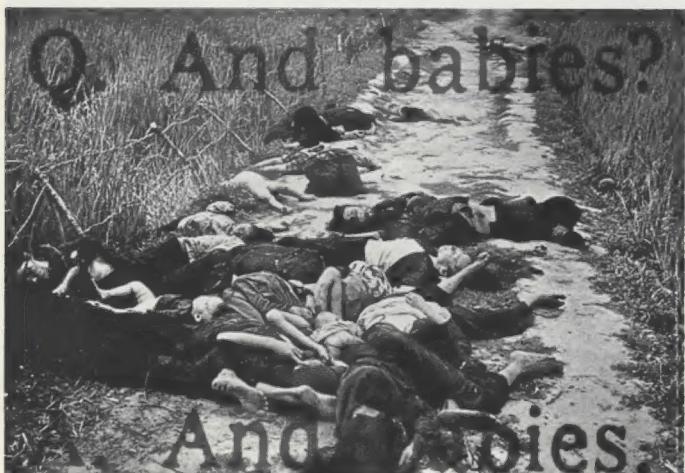
The idea of an avant-garde, an élite of artistic and cultural geniuses who would lead society to a better life, emerged in France during the 1830s. Artistic advances were to be compatible with the improvement of social and political conditions. Courbet (see pp. 282, 283), for example, honestly believed in the didactic and social purposes of art. Many avant-garde movements such as Art Nouveau, German Expressionism, Futurism, De Stijl in Holland, Constructivism in Russia, and the Bauhaus in Germany were dedicated to reforming society. Ironically, these movements for the most part were regressive with respect to the centuries-long evolution of the separation of artists and craftsmen; they sought a reunification of the two and elimination of the 18th-century ideal of "fine art." The artist should function as a worker or craftsman, an educator, a visionary dedicated to the good of society.

The artist militant has been more than just a formal revolutionary, but aside from the photographer and the cartoonist, his history has not been marked with success. Avant-garde artists and movements often have been unable to reconcile the claims of genius and art with the social and political needs of society. The Impressionist and Post-Impressionist groups included those who were anarchists in private life, but their art alone would not tell us this (Pl. 49, p. 298; Fig. 419). Since the

1930s there has been a great distrust of politically or socially didactic "message" art among the most venturesome artists. With the invention of photography early in the last century the arts were challenged, for the first time in history, in their exclusive claim to represent the visual world and the development of national self-imagery. Artists have often incorporated photography into their work, and many photographers have been creative artists. But it is primarily photography that has assumed the burden of visually recording and commenting upon events. For example, when the Art Workers Coalition in New York City prepared a poster depicting the My Lai massacre, it chose to reproduce in color a photograph of that atrocity (Fig. 614).

**Possibilities and Pressures** In the 1960s the phenomenon of the avant-garde died. The reasons for its demise included the great number of movements and the diversity of their direction, the increased mutual acceptance of artists and public, and the embracing of mass culture by Pop artists. Rebellion and risk-taking, so vital and exciting to the creative act for sculptors and painters of the 1950s, yielded to the premeditated, impersonal facture and "safe" format. In the last decade the artist has had to share his much-publicized alienation from society with a whole generation of young people and minority groups. The image of the suffering artist has paled before exposure in the mass media of the unspeakable anguish, privation, and dehumanization of millions of people afflicted by natural disasters, cruel wars, social injustice, poverty, and starvation. The consumer advocate, the poverty lawyer, the militant feminist, the engineer, and the ecologist have eclipsed the artist, for these seem to promise utopian visions to a society that seeks reform. What, then, are the incentives for becoming an artist?

The artist continues to be most successful as a rebel against art, yet, as before, what he now believes to be an assault on old bastions of taste and thought will be tomorrow's art school curriculum. The revolutionary quickly becomes evolutionary. In financial terms the profession continues as a poor risk. According to expert testimony, less than 3 percent of all artists live to see their work appreciate in value, and it is doubtful that as many can make a living exclusively from their art. Statistically art has been a dying profession since the 19th century, when academic art was at its numerical height. The desire for competition—a striving for critical or public recognition on the one hand and a private contest with the history of art on the other—may be an incentive, but it is probably not sufficient to launch a man or woman on a studio career. The one area in which artists continue to lead scientists—notably psychiatrists—is in recognizing the need to discover and enjoy the

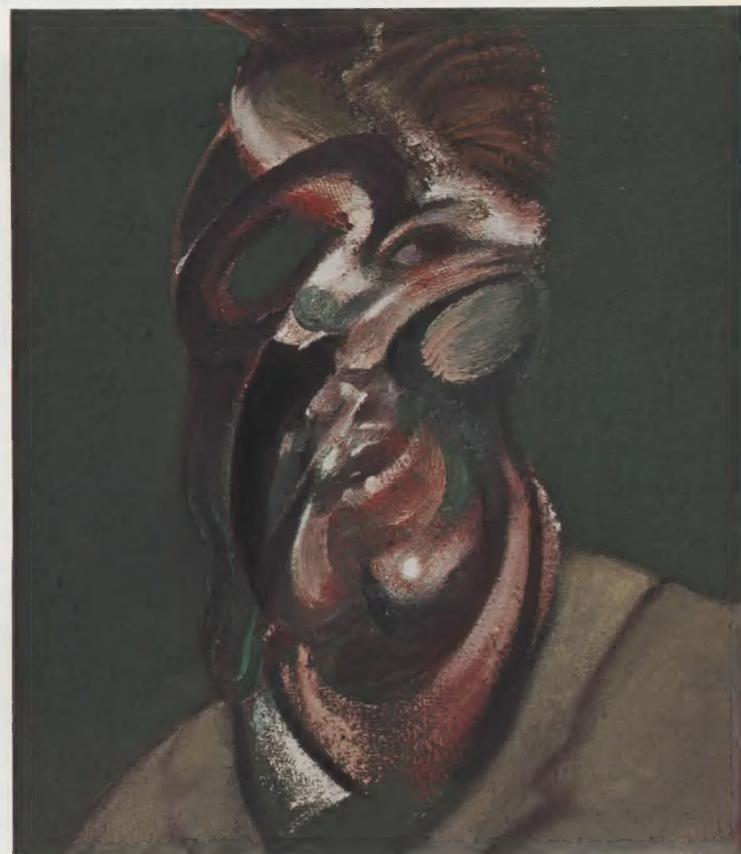


left: 614. ART WORKERS COALITION and R. L. HAEBERLE. *Q. and Babies? A. and Babies.* 1970. Offset lithograph, 25 x 38". Museum of Modern Art, New York.



*left:* Plate 97. MAX BECKMANN. *Self-Portrait in a Tuxedo*. 1927. Oil on canvas,  $4'6\frac{1}{2}'' \times 3'1\frac{3}{4}''$ . Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (See pp. 458, 459.)

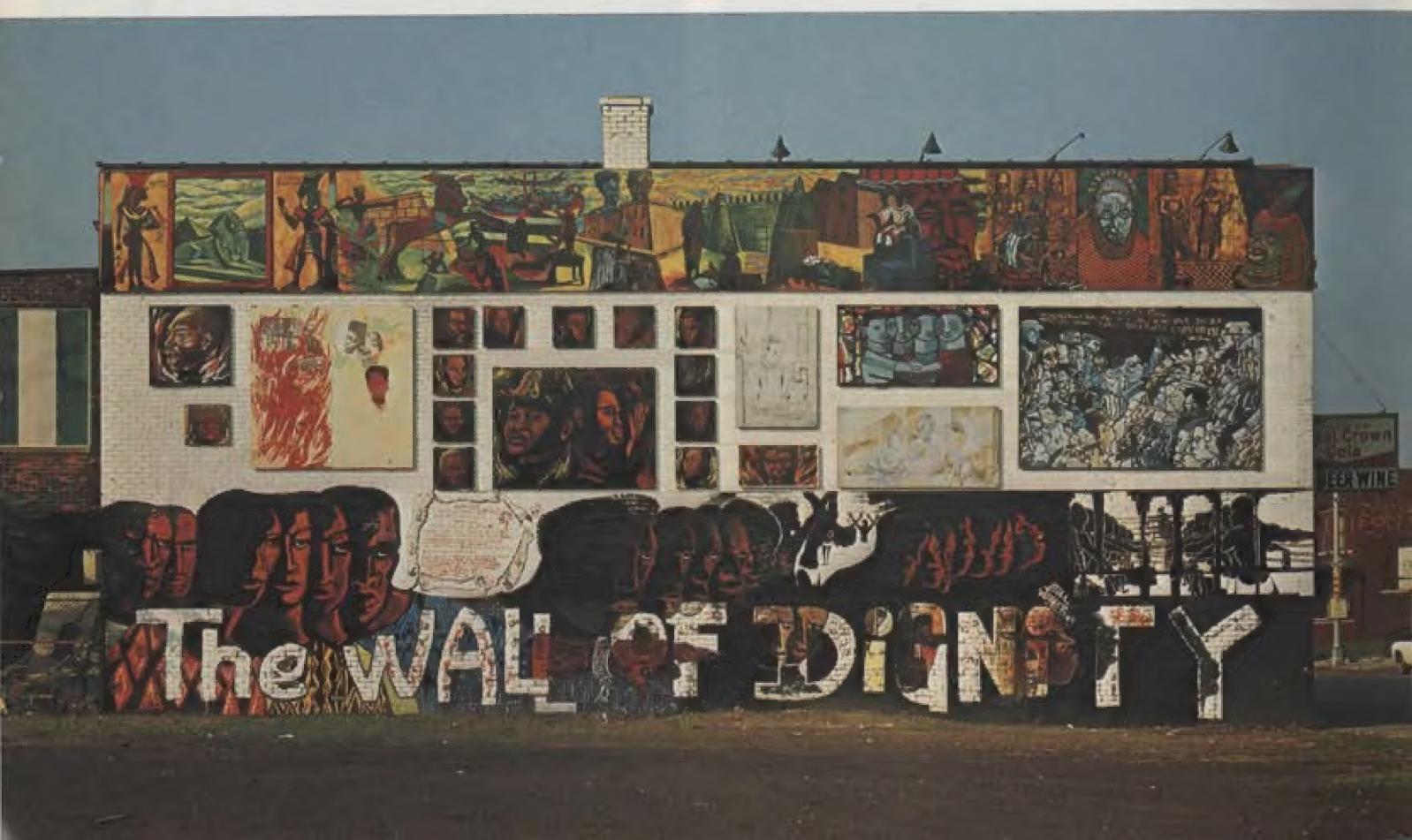
*below:* Plate 98. FRANCIS BACON. Center panel from *3 Studies for a Self-Portrait*. 1967. Oil on panel,  $14 \times 12''$ . Courtesy Marlborough Fine Art, Ltd., London. (See p. 459.)





*below: Plate 99. The Wall of Dignity, Detroit, Mich. (See p. 465.)*

*left: Plate 100. ROMARE BEARDEN. Blue Interior, Morning. 1968. Collage, 3'8" x 4'8". Collection Chase Manhattan Bank, New York. (See p. 466.)*



right : 615. THE PULSA GROUP. *Television Sensorium*. 1971. Video projectors, television, cameras, strobe lights, plants, electronic control equipment, and speakers. Automation House, New York.

self, not the self trained by society, but the second, creative self that emerges in flashes of insight or inspiration. Being an artist means finding or inventing one's self. Since the 19th century and the bohemians, art, of all the professions, has been the most equitable with a life style in which the self can find fullest and most consistent expression.

The artist looks at the history of art and says, "What is missing is *me*." As Carl André has stated, "Men climb mountains because they are there. Men make art because it isn't." In the past, society and a prosperous middle class created the need for art. Today, lacking a similar patronage or demand and in competition with other visual media, the artist must create the need for his work by making it so effective that it will be desired by others—that is, if he wants more than just self-gratification. The artist's profession still offers the satisfaction of making or doing something—a whole object for contemplation, an effect, or even intervention in an existing system—whose conception, if not execution, is still individual. Some young artists, such as the Pulsa Group at Yale (Fig. 615), even submerge individuality in favor of group identity to combine life and art style, thus making complex technology work for them instead of the reverse. A number of artists are working with science in the hope of civilizing technology and preventing its domination of our lives, not to mention our tastes.

The contemporary artist has been described as holding a poker hand in which all the cards are wild. In theory, he can make his move in any direction. Art of this century is omnidirectional, reactionary as well as radical. Frank Stella (Pl. 94, p. 446; Fig. 598) has argued that "you can never go back," others have opted to work with motifs, styles, and materials of other periods, in the belief that there is no such thing as progress or "modernity." In the last century a tacit imperative by which advanced art was judged demanded to know whether or not art was of its time (see Chap. 15). Now, the word *relevance* plays a similar but more vague role as the criterion of an art's validity. The relativity of this criterion has paradoxically ensured the artist's cherished freedom. For example, oil painting is irrelevant to the artist who uses acrylics, modeling is obsolete to the welder, physical objects are no longer valid to the artist working in light, artistic "engineering" is shunned by the earth worker who opts for vernacular materials or nature itself. "Process art" is a fraud for the conceptual artist, who is content with sketched or written "proposals." And, of course, all of the foregoing are evasions of serious artistic problems, charades, travesties, or reductions to absurdity in the view of the painter who lovingly brushes his oil paint on canvas into the form of a human face or still life in a way that Manet or Cézanne would recognize.



Relevancy and the possibilities and pressures of art have different meanings for hundreds of black artists, who do not consider what white artists have done or are doing to be important for them. Some Afro-American artists are now concerned with expressing their race, something no African artist aspired to do. The pressures for a black art and an expression of what it means to be black in a white-dominated society have come from within the black community, from its writers and political leaders in the 1960s, more perhaps than from the artists themselves. For some black artists this means racial subject matter: a *Wall of Dignity* or heroes in a Detroit ghetto (Pl. 99, p. 464), black artists celebrated on a Boston handball court, or a painting by Dana Chandler, Jr. (b. 1941), of the bullet-riddled door of Fred Hampton (Fig. 616), the Black Panther leader killed by Chicago police. When white critics point out that this is like American social protest art of the 1930s, an artistic throwback and cliché art, the blacks who paint these walls and memorials reply that their art is for the black urban community *now*, not the white art establishment that has practiced deliberate and unconscious discrimination against artists of their race. They want to establish racial pride through chronicle and commentary, daily reminders of heroism and injustice. In the minds of these artists, quality cannot be sensed by Caucasian critics tuned in only to "Whitey's tastes." In any case, it is a secondary consideration.

The drive to rediscover the African strain of their cultural heritage has led some black artists to include Benin bronzes (Fig. 277) in still-life oil paintings or, like Joe Overstreet (b. 1933), to make abstractions using colors found in African textiles (Fig. 617). But there are also many gifted black artists, such as Sam Gilliam (b. 1933) and Richard Hunt (b. 1935), who, while working privately for their race, try in their pro-



fession to make the best art possible (Figs. 618, 619). Although their art is abstract, they consider it to be an expression of their experience as black men in a predominately white culture.

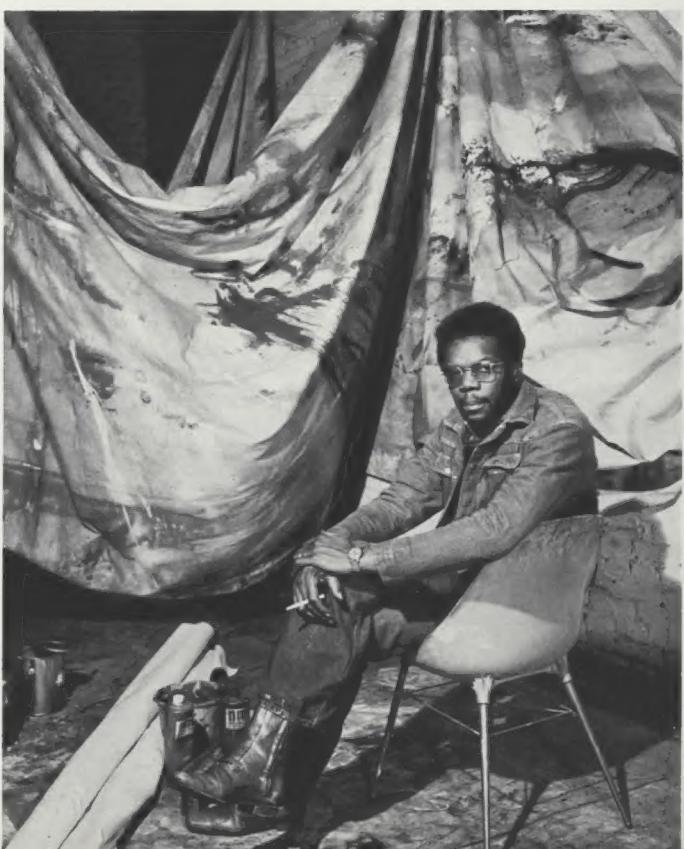
There is no more a stereotyped black artist today than there is a white or an African one. The black sculptor Ed Wilson tells his students: "Malcolm X is my brother, Martin Luther King is my brother, Eldridge Cleaver is my brother! But Michelangelo is my grandfather!" The ancestry of the art produced by Romare Bearden (b. 1914) comprises African sculpture, Dutch 17th-century painting, abstraction, collage, and photographic documentaries. The spirit of his work traces back to his having lived in the South, Manhattan, and Paris. Bearden's work succeeds in fusing racial consciousness, compassion for humanity, and awareness of the possibilities open to modern artists. *Blue Interior, Morning* (Pl. 100, p. 464) speaks of "the life I know best, those things common to all cultures." It also carries his conviction that black culture in the United States "is perhaps the richest because it is the one life style that is talking about life and about the continuation of life. . . and through all of the anguish—the joy of life."

For all his freedoms, the contemporary artist must live with terrific pressures beyond those described. His profession is as competitive as that of business; whether he likes it or not, he is part of the art business and art history. Rare is the artist who wants no recognition and refuses to show, document, or sell his art, to grant interviews and be written about. In past centuries he competed for mastery in his guild, commissions at court, civic appointments, government prizes, and free entry into official annual salons. Today he still competes for exposure and for acceptance by periodicals, museums, galleries, and col-

above left : 616. DANA CHANDLER, JR., with *Fred Hampton's Door*. 1970. Acrylic on board, real bullet holes; 26 x 22". Collection the artist.

above right : 617. JOE OVERSTREET, with *Indian Sun*. 1969. Diameter 12'. Courtesy Ankrum Gallery, Los Angeles.

618. SAM GILLIAM, with *Carousel Change*. 1970. Acrylics with powdered aluminum on work canvas, 10 x 75'. Collection Darthea Speyer, Paris.





above : 619. RICHARD HUNT. *Minor Monument, Number 1*. 1963. Welded steel, height 4' 2". Collection Mr. and Mrs. B. C. Holland, Chicago.

right : 620. AD REINHARDT in his studio. 1961. Courtesy Jewish Museum, New York.

lectors, for teaching positions and fellowships. These pressures are in all probability comparable in pleasure and pain to those suffered by artists in the past. But the contemporary artist experiences an even more serious threat to sustained recognition—and especially to his self-confidence—in the staggering number of his compatriots and the velocity of current artistic change. The artist may actually feel that he faces obsolescence. Leonardo complained that art was changing every ten years. Rembrandt came to know critical scorn and neglect in favor of younger, more typically Dutch painters (see Chap. 11). By age twenty-three James Ensor was renounced by the same critics who had exalted him, and he saw himself as Christ crucified by his detractors (Pl. 46, p. 295). At the end of the 19th century the velocities of change were felt roughly every five years. Between 1907 and 1914 they had accelerated into annual phenomena for a relatively small number of artists. In Russia between 1913 and 1917 they were almost monthly. Today they are at least seasonal for untold thousands. Each emerging wave from the art schools tries to sweep over its predecessors. Artists barely over thirty are given retrospectives of ten years' work or less, and then they often disappear from sight. Artists like Stella, Johns, and Lichtenstein, who have held their international reputations for a decade, are becoming rare. Andy Warhol, who has given up painting for filmmaking, foresees in

the near future that "everyone will have fifteen minutes of fame." (Warhol is thinking of changing his name to John Doe.) It is not certain that this high speed of change is a threat to art; it is more unsettling to artists, in terms of the emotional and psychological pressures that build up as a young artist, still in his twenties, suddenly finds his work "dated" or "invalid."

What makes art worth the effort to the artist? Perhaps it is still the freedom to choose and pursue ideas, to discover the self by means of art. A great and superbly realized photograph of the late Ad Reinhardt (Fig. 620) calls to mind the phenomenon of the modern artist who carries within his mind the history of art but who, in order to extend it meaningfully, logically, and personally, must reject what has gone before. The photograph, which frames the artist against a window squared like his canvases (Fig. 596), shows him inactive but contemplative, reminding us of the importance of creative idleness. In moments like these the artist confronts his drawing or canvas and sees the field of his materials where he is born, lives, dies, and is reborn. Art remains like an act of love, a potent gesture of life, a fist clenched against death.

